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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of trip programming in Alaska for those seeking a low-cost wilderness adventure. Alaska is a land of glaciers, mountains, lakes, rivers, forests, and wildlife. Safety is a major concern when traveling in Alaska. A local guide or outdoor educator can assist with safety and logistical planning. Travelers should plan to spend at least 2 weeks in Alaska. July and August are the most popular months to visit the state. Lodging, rentals, and some fresh foods are more expensive than in the rest of the country, although gas, outdoor equipment, and food staples are about the same as in the rest of the country. Public transportation includes the Alaska Railroad, buses, airlines, and the Alaska Marine Highway System. The paper lists specific low-cost wilderness trips in the following areas: (1) backpacking and ski touring; (2) trekking and ski touring; (3) mountain biking; (4) climbing and alpine ski touring; (5) river running and flatwater touring; and (6) sea kayaking. The paper recommends 26 trips, with a brief description and the number of days to be allotted for each. The paper also provides names, addresses, and phone numbers of organizations that can supply useful information for planning Alaskan adventures. In addition, descriptions are given for six books on adventuring in Alaska. A map of Alaska displays numbered locations for the 26 recommended trips. (KS)

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FIRST STEPS TO THE LAST FRONTIER: PROGRAMMING SUGGESTIONS FOR ALASKAN ADVENTURES

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Map design and graphics by Kevin Powell

Abstract

This article provides an idiosyncratic overview of trip programming in Alaska. It assumes the reader is an experienced outdoorsperson who is looking to lead an Alaskan wilderness adventure at a relatively low cost. The emphasis is on Southcentral Alaska where the author lives and has the most experience. The article covers where to go, logistical considerations, and sources for further information.

Introduction

Alaska is a land of superlatives. It has a million acres for every day of the year. Its over half million square miles, about a fifth the size of the "Lower 48," are populated by barely more than a half million people. Thousands of glaciers, an estimated 100,000 to be more exact, cover about 30,000 square miles, an area approximately equal to South Carolina. Alaska has ten peaks over 15,000 feet. Minnesota may be known as the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes - Alaska has 3 million! Over 34,000 miles of coast is more than the rest of the United States combined. Roaming Alaska's wilderness are the United States' largest numbers of wolves, grizzly bears, wolverines, lynx, moose, caribou, mountain goats, not counting the species unique to the State - the musk oxen, polar bear, and dall sheep. Swimming in her waters are 15 kinds of whales, walrus, numerous species of seals and sea lions, and incredible populations of salmon, halibut, trout, and invertebrates. Three thousand rivers drain Alaska, including five over 500 miles long; one creek is over 300 miles long! Forests cover 200,000 square miles, an area equal to the state of California. There are almost 100 National parks, refuges, and forests.

Concerns

I very much love Alaska and its largely unspoiled, uncrowded wilderness. It was with some trepidation that I chose to speak at the AEE and to write for this volume - the last thing I want to do is promote overuse of my own backyard. However, I firmly believe that 1) most of the readers will simply fantasize about a trip to Alaska [and in doing so will become advocates of a wild Alaska] and 2) the ones that do venture north, if blessed with an understanding, awe, and respect for the Greatland, will travel lightly and, in experiencing Alaska, will be additional strong actors for its protection. It is a main purpose of this article to encourage such attitudes.

Low-impact recreational use is no doubt second nature to AEE members, so I will try not to belabor the point. As you know, the sub-Arctic/Arctic environment is particularly fragile, as well as being very slow to recover from damage. In addition, while there is plenty of wilderness, put-ins, trails, roadheads, and sometimes campsites are relatively rare and so receive potentially heavy pressures. Group size, activities,

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timing, and techniques should be appropriate for this unique, irreplaceable treasure.

Another concern is of course safety. Alaska is a harsh and unforgiving land, with emergency assistance often days away. Severe weather, cold water, rough seas, unstable snow, trackless areas, and long distances are all potential ingredients for trouble. Train well, plan well, and above all, use good judgement - Alaska provides few second chances.

A final concern is that Alaska be appreciated in all its splendor - environmentally, recreationally, culturally, historically, and spiritually. I am saddened when I see groups led by individuals who only seem to focus on the more obvious adventure opportunities. If you are not experienced in Alaska before bringing up a group, one way to appreciate and be able to share all the treasures of the Greatland, is to work with a local guide or outdoor educator with a strong record of Alaskan experience. Such individuals can be found advertising in the back of outdoor magazines such as Backpacker, Outside, or Alaska, or contact Alaska Wilderness Studies at UAA for recommendations. Outdoor leaders who live, study, and play year-round in Alaska can add immeasurably to both your experience and peace of mind for safety and logistic planning.

General Thoughts

Due to the distance from the rest of the country and the cost of getting there, two weeks is the minimum I would recommend planning on spending in Alaska. The Alaska Highway alone is a long two to three day drive, rough on a vehicle, and in my opinion, boring scenery-wise. If you wish to bring your own vehicle I would definitely recommend the Alaska Ferry System. It is a gorgeous introduction to the state and a great way to both meet new people and to relax. Cost and time can both be saved by driving to Prince Rupert, British Columbia. and boarding the ferry there. From there it is still a two day ferry trip with an additional day of driving to get to Anchorage or Fairbanks. Even if you fly to and from Alaska you can count on it consuming a day on each end of your trip.

Certainly the most popular time to visit the state is July and August, with June almost as busy. For a first trip or for a student or client trip you will probably want to stick with these summer months. For a personal trip, however, I would heartily recommend that you consider one of the shoulder months, particularly the spring when we have lots of daylight, great snow, little precipitation, and few mosquitos, tourists, or bears!

If you plan on coming in the summer make sure you have reservations. Vans, ferry spaces (for vehicles), lodging, and sometimes airline seats are often booked solid in July and August and to almost the same extent in June.

Costs

Some costs, including lodging, rentals, and some fresh foods are quite a bit more expensive than the rest of the country. Other costs, such as gas, outdoor equipment, camping, and food staples are right in line with much of the country. I have listed some prices to give you a very rough idea of costs, please keep in mind these are approximate prices, as of 1991.

Relatively inexpensive lodging can be found at hostels (~$15 per person per night) throughout the state and, in the summer, at University of Alaska dorms (~$25) in Juneau, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. In the summer expect to pay about $80 - 150 for a double room at a hotel and at least $35 for a bed and breakfast. Again, reserve early for groups if you are coming in the summer.

There are several dozen public use cabins in the Tsongass and Chugach National Forests (Southeast, Kenai Peninsula, and Prince William Sound areas). Other cabins are available through the Alaska State Park System, Mountaineering Club of Alaska, Alaska Alpine Club, and various other individuals and organizations. The Forest Service and State Park cabins should be reserved as early as possible. Costs are generally reasonable, starting at $10/night.

Vehicle rentals should also be reserved early if your travels will be in June, July, or August. Costs for a car vary from $30 to $100 a day and from $50 to $150 and up for a van. The cheaper prices can be found by going with the "Rent-a-Wreck" type outfits.

Public transportation includes the Alaska Railroad (Seward, Anchorage, Talkeetna, Denali National Park, and Fairbanks), buses which go to just about every city and town on the road system, airlines, and the

Alaska Marine Highway System (otherwise known as the Alaska ferries, which connect all the towns in Southeast Alaska and Whittier, Valdez, Seward, Cordova, Homer, Seldovia, Kodiak, and Dutch Harbor in Southcentral). Several charter bus services can help you to customize a trip as well Float, wheeled, and ski planes are available to charter in most of the larger and some of the smaller towns ($125-$300/hour for 1 to 5 people). In coastal communities boats can also be chartered for kayak or hiking trips ($5-10/mile for 6 to 12+ people). As always, if traveling with a group in the summer, make reservations early.

Where to go

I am assuming that you are traveling all the way to Alaska to find wilderness adventures. For that reason I would generally recommend against taking groups to the most popular backcountry destinations, Denali and Glacier Bay. While they have the "magic" name, plenty of other locations are blessed with similar scenery and wildlife, while avoiding crowds, permit systems, and adding to the crowded areas' problems. I am also assuming that you want to keep costs down. For this reason I will recommend mainly trips that can be done from the road system.

Several areas that partcularly stand our for their offerings of wilderness, inexpensive access, and multiple adventure activities should be mentioned. **Chugach State Park**, within the Municipality of Anchorage, offers first class wilderness and rich wildlife viewing all just a short drive from the State's largest city. In the southeast corner of Alaska's "mainland" is **Wrangell-St. Elias National Park**, with ghost towns, huge glaciers, excellent river running, and superb mountain biking. **Chugach National Forest**, encompassing the east half of the Kenai Peninsula and nearly all of Prince William Sound, has great hiking trails, unmatched sea kayaking, cabins, and easy access from the road system. Just 60 miles north of Anchorage is the **Hatcher Pass** area with great rock climbing, almost year-round skiing, and alpine hiking.

Below I have listed a number of specific trips that meet the wilderness and inexpensive criteria. The trip number refers to the accompanying map. The listed time does not include side trips which could add multiple days to almost all of these trips. Happy trails!

• Backpacking/Ski Touring (trails and sometimes cabins)

1) *Southern half of the Resurrection Trail*: 2-3 days. Cabins, fishing, wildlife, mostly forested walking along river and lake valleys. Chugach National Forest on the Kenai Peninsula.

2) *Crow Pass-Eagle River Traverse*: 2 days. Walk right next to a glacier! Mining history, forested and alpine scenery, and wildlife. One of the more popular trips in Alaska. 2000 feet elevation gain and one sometimes nasty river crossing. Chugach State Park.

3) *Hicks Creek-Chitna Pass*: 4-5 days. Trails for some of the way. Alpine tundra, wildlife, and good rock hounding. 100 miles northeast of Anchorage, BLM and the State. Some environmental damage from mining and mechanized hunting/recreation.

4) *Lost Lake:* 2 days. Forest, meadow, and tundra hiking. A spectacular turquoise lake and distant ocean views. Public access is being challenged by local property owners and miners. Chugach National Forest on the Kenai Peninsula.

•Trekking/Ski Touring (off trail and generally for more experienced groups)

5) *Anderson Pass and southern side of the Alaska Range:* 5-8 days. The only trek I can recommend in Denali National Park. Some glacial travel and numerous, sometimes serious, stream crossings Wildlife, alpine tundra, and isolation. Permits required

6) *Peters Hills:* 1-4 days. Easy walking on alpine tundra with incredible views of Denali. Denali State Park.

7) *Crow Pass-South Fork of Eagle River or Arctic Valley*: 3-4 days. Several high and rugged mountain passes, meadowed valleys, alpine tundra, stream crossings, and wildlife. Chugach State Park.

• Mountain Biking (both backroads and trails)

8) *Denali Highway*: (Cantwell to Paxson) 135 gravel miles. Beautiful views of the central Alaska Range. Busy starting in late August due to the hunting season, otherwise generally quiet

9) *McCarthy Road:* (Chitina to McCarthy) 60 gravel miles. Beautiful views of the Wrangell and

Chugach Mountains. Side trips down the Copper River and on numerous old mining roads. The road is somewhat busy on weekends.

10) *Johnson Pass*: 21 trail miles. Alpine and forested trail in the heart of the Kenai Mountains. Best later in August - September. Chugach National Forest.

11) *Seldovia-Rocky Bay:* ~30 miles. Coastal and coastal forest biking on a gravel road that quickly deteriorates into a washed out trail. Major stream crossings. Native and State lands.

12) *Eklutna Lake Road:* ~15 miles one way. Forest, meadow, and lake side pedaling on an old gravel road. Views of glaciers, rugged peaks, and wildlife. Chugach State Park.

• Climbing/Alpine Ski Touring

13) *Eklutna Glacier Traverse:* 4-6 days. The classic Alaskan glacial traverse. Alpine snow and ice climbing. Some huts. Chugach State Park.

14) *Mint Glacier System:* 3-6 days. Snow and rock climbing on decent granite in a Bugaboo like setting. Some huts. Hatcher Pass area, 65 miles north of Anchorage. State of Alaska.

15) *Archangel Valley*: Day climbing on granite with some easy alpine ascents available as well. Hatcher Pass area, 65 miles north of Anchorage. Private and State of Alaska.

16) *Ruth Glacier Area*: 3-10 days. Snow, rock, and ice climbing in a Pleistocene Yosemite. Crowded May-June and inaccessible by mid- July. One hut. Denali National Park. (fly-in).

17) *Castner-Canwell Glacier System:* 3-10 days. Alpine snow climbing in the heart of the eastern Alaska Range. Some huts. Off the Richardson Highway, 150 miles south of Fairbanks. BLM.

• River Running/Flatwater Touring

18) *Copper River*: (Chitina-Cordova) 4-7 days. Class I-III. Necessitates a flight or ferry from Cordova back to the road system. Wildlife, glaciers, forests. Native land Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve *Stikine River:* (Telegraph Creek, B.C.-Wrangell) 4-7 days. Class I-III. Wildlife, hot spring, and coastal rain forest. Tsongass National Forest

19) *Chulitna River*: 1-3 days. Class I-III. Wildlife and Denali views. Denali State Park.

20) *Tangle Lakes-Delta River*: 2-3 days. Lake and Class I-II (with one falls to portage). Wildlife, excellent fishing, and tundra. BLM.

21) *Swan Lake System*: 2-4 days. Lake paddling with numerous portages. Wildlife and excellent fishing. Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

22) *Wood-Tikchik Lake System:* 4-10 days. Turquoise fjord-like lakes carved into low granite mountains. Wildlife and world-class fishing. Wood-Tikchik State Park. (fly-in)

• Sea Kayaking

23) *Blackstone Bay*: 2-5 days. Tidewater glaciers relatively close to a town (Whittier). Chugach National Forest.

24) *Culross Passage*: 3-6 days. Relatively quiet waters inviting a host of explorations. Wildlife, coastal forest, and mountains. Cabins. Chugach National Forest.

25) *Aialik Bay*: 2-6 days. Numerous tidewater glaciers and wildlife. Cabin. Kenai Fjords National Park (fly-in only practical access for beginning-intermediate paddlers).

26) *Halibut Cove Area*: 1-4 days. Great intertidal life in Kachemak Bay, one of the richest bodies of water in the world. Hiking trails, lodges, glaciers, wildlife. Relatively busy place for Alaska. Kachemak Bay State Park.

Permits for backcountry travel are necessary for Denali and Glacier Bay National Parks. Other units of the public land system generally ask that recreationalists merely register - always a good idea both to allow them to keep a count of visitation and in case you have trouble. For guided/educational trips in which money is being paid directly to you by clients/students, other restrictions may apply; inquire directly with the appropriate land management agency.

One-ninth of Alaska is privately owned by Native Corporations. Permission should be obtained before traveling on these lands, and in some cases fees are charged for land use activities. For further information contact the Alaska Division of Tourism.

When traveling in "Bush" Alaska, consider yourself a visitor in someone else's land. Many Alaskans, both Native and White, treasure their privacy; an unobtrusive respect of their lifestyle will be appreciated. Remember that most land around cabins and villages will be privately owned. As in any travel, courtesy, patience, and a smile will be your best bets.

Trip Planning

Due to lack of amenities, uncomprimising conditions, and vast distances, planning is essential for a safe and enjoyable trip. The following organizations have particularly useful information for planning your Alaskan adventure:

Organization	*Kind of Information*
AK Public Lands Info Center 605 W. 4th, Suite 105 Anchorage, AK 99501 907/271-2737	Alaska State Parks, BLM lands, National Forests, National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges
Alaska Wilderness Studies University Alaska Anchorage 3211 Providence Dr. Anchorage, AK 99508 907/786-1468	Alaska Bibliography, Alaska Wilderness Organization List, Current Trip Planning Information
US Geological Survey 4230 Univeristy Dr. Anchorage, AK 99508 (907) 786-7011	Topographic maps Statewide
Alaska Division of Tourism P.O. Box 196710 Anchorage, AK 99519 (907) 563-2157	General Statewide Tourist Information Ask for the current "Alaska Trip Planner"
Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau 1600 A St., Suite 200 Anchorage, AK 99501 (907) 276-4118	General Tourist Information regarding Anchorage and Southcentral Alaska Ask for the current "Anchorage Visitors Guide"

References

There is a large number of books about Alaska, a full bibliography is available from AWS. Listed below are a few of the most useful and general books on adventuring in Alaska:

Book	*Subject*
Alaska's Parklands Seattle: The Mountaineers	Statewide guide to over 100 State and National Parks, Forests, and Refuges.
Alaska Paddling Guide J&R Enterprises, P.O. Box 8624, Anch., AK 99508	Statewide guide to river running
55 Ways to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska Seattle: The Mountaineers	Hiking, scrambling, skiing, and canoeing in Southcentral Alaska
The Milepost Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books	Annual guide to all of Alaska's, and the Yukon's roads plus the Alaska and Cassiar Highways
Southeast Alaska by Pack and Paddle Seattle:The Mountaineers	Hiking, scrambling, and canoeing in Alaska's Panhandle
The Wilderness Milepost Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing	Guide to the off-road portions of Alaska, generally known as the Bush, plus parks, refuges, and forests. Published bi-annually

I hope this brief introduction to Alaska trip planning has been helpful. While it can give you at least a brief idea of what to expect, only experiencing Alaska's wonders firsthand will truly let you come to know the Last Frontier. I encourage you to travel north to share the beauty, adventure, and respect that makes Alaska the Greatland.

(An earlier version of this manuscript appeared in Proceedings 1990 National Conference on Outdoor Recreation as "Alaskan Adventures: Programming in the Greatland.")

Autobiography

Todd Miner is the head of Alaska Wilderness Studies, the outdoor education arm of the University of Alaska Anchorage. He has worked for AWS for the last 13 of his 16 years in Alaska, teaching classes in climbing, backpacking, survival, expedition mountaineering, and wilderness leadership. He has led expeditions to the summits of many Alaskan and Canadian mountains including Blackburn, Denali, Sanford, Foraker, St. Elias, Logan, and Drum. Rafting, sea kayaking, skiing, and trekking have taken him to most of the corners of the State.

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